

# Does the UN Report on the Gaza War Accomplish Anything?

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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In the past few weeks, two reports have been issued on recent wars. The first was the Goldstone report, a UN report on the Gaza war which occurred during the last days of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. The second was an EU report on the origins of the Georgia Russia war of August 2008. These reports are notable because they both come to conclusions that were almost entirely predictable.

The central findings of the EU report on Georgia can be summarized as that Georgia fired first so in some technical sense started the war, but that Russian aggression towards Georgia predated the events of August 7th, 2008 and created the context for Georgia's actions on August 7th. This finding is also a nice summation of the conventional and widely accepted understanding of the origins of the war in Europe and the US.

The Goldstone report, for its part, came to the conclusion that Israel committed war crimes during the Gaza War and that Israel used disproportionate force and targeted civilian populations in Gaza. The report also found that Hamas committed war crimes as well in targeting civilian populations in Israel, but that these were lesser than those committed by Israel. Again, one cannot be surprised that the UN, justifiably or not, took this position.

The main conclusions of these reports so clearly echo the institution which commissioned these reports that the executive summaries could have been written by mid-level bureaucrats at either institution before doing any field work or investigation. Of course, both reports are the results of a great deal of fieldwork, testimonies, investigation, expert opinion and the like. Moreover, reflecting accepted wisdom does not, in of itself, discredit a report or somehow make the report wrong.

These nature of the findings of these reports do, however, raise the question of what the real purpose of the reports were. The stated purpose of the reports was simply to determine the truth about the origins of one war and the conduct of another, but it is hard to take this entirely at face value. It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that a major purpose of the both reports was to provide a rationale for both institutions to pursue policies to which they had largely already committed. This is more true of the EU report because the UN doesn't usually pursue policies in that sense.

Since the outbreak of the war, the EU has sought to find a way to distance itself somewhat from Georgia's leadership while continuing to search for a difficult balance with Russia. This report provides further opportunity to do that. Similarly, the UN can

be counted upon to take a critical position on most matters relating to Israel and to adapt the occasional corresponding resolution.

What then do these reports accomplish? The scholarly, legal and diplomatic credentials of the authors of these reports, the amount of research of all kinds, the time and hard work which go into drafting the reports all suggest that these are serious documents, but they are also still largely subjective and political documents. The question, for example, of when the Georgia war started, really boils down to when you start looking, or as Bill Clinton might say, what your definition of “start” is. If you define the start of the war as August 7, 2008 than almost by definition primary blame will be attributed to Georgia, but if you identify the start of the war, not implausibly, as a few days, months or even years earlier, the answer is far less clear.

Both these reports provide valuable information upon which scholars and policy makers can draw, but they will also now become part of the debate on both wars, reduced to one or two sentence sound bites and used by both sides to prove their points. This is not so much a lost opportunity but a reflection of the limits of this type of report and the deep and unavoidable political nature of these reports.